

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ON ELDERS OF COLOR

By SUSAN MARKEY

Older African American residents of West Oakland, Calif., may not know what vinyl chloride is, but many were relieved when the Red Star Yeast/Lasaffre plant in their neighborhood closed last April.

American Indian elders in California's Pitt River Region are worried about high levels of inorganic mercury poisoning dating back to the California Gold Rush when mercury was used for mining, as well as deposits from batteries, thermometers and other devices currently dumped in their area.

Low-income Latino elders in the Central San Joaquin Valley community of Patterson are not only concerned about pesticides, but they also report that their grandchildren must wear high boots on rainy days because the sewage system is so old it leaks raw effluent into the streets.

These were only some of the concerns voiced by older adults of color around California in a series of focus groups funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the California Endowment and conducted by the American Society on Aging (ASA) during the summer of 2003.

NATIONAL AGENDA

The ASA project was intended to add the views of people of color to the EPA's earlier public listening sessions in cities around the United States. The purpose of those sessions, according to Kathy Sykes, head of the EPA initiative, was "to solicit input from older Americans and other interested people to ensure the development of a comprehensive national agenda on the environment and aging." The agenda will do three things, she explained: Prioritize and study environmental health threats to older people; examine the effect that a rapidly growing aging population might have on the environment; and encourage older adults to volunteer in their own communities to help reduce hazards and protect the environment.

Northern California regional and local organizations participating in the ASA project included the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Chester Street Block Club Association, Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, Lao Senior Association Inc., Lao Senior Social Club, Literacy for Environmental Justice, Network for Elders, Patterson Salvation Army Service Extension, Richmond Health Services, Richmond Senior Center, Southeast Asian Senior Access Collaborative, and West Oakland Senior Center.

ASA also conducted interviews with professionals in the fields of aging and public health, as well as with environmental advocates, and discovered that many professionals in aging have little familiarity with the impact of environmental hazards on older adults.

In all the communities ASA visited, the fight to improve environmental conditions has been going on for decades. In many cases, the level of documented lies and bureaucracy from local and federal government has discouraged residents from fighting back. However, in some cases, the leadership and dedication of environmental groups and the more outspoken residents have led to major victories.

Working on the study "has heightened my appreciation for the important role that environmentalists play on behalf of people of color," said Marlene Jones. A diversity consultant for the ASA project, Jones has spent years following cleanup efforts at the Hunter's Point area along the San Francisco Bay. Adjacent to a largely low-income neighborhood of the city populated mostly by African American families, the Hunter's Point shipping yards were turned into a toxic wasteland by the United States Navy. The Navy used the shipyards to transport weapons and other hazardous materials starting during World War II and ending with the war in Vietnam. Jones added that African Americans poured into the area from the South during World War II to work long shifts, night and day, to build the Liberty Ships, 18 of which were named for outstanding African Americans.

Generally, explained Dave Monk, executive director of Oregon Toxins Alliance, "People of color often live in the least expensive housing, adjacent to industrial sites and freeways, so they have a much greater exposure to toxic substances." For example, he said, nonwhite communities are often exposed to high toxin levels from diesel fuel emissions from nearby highway traffic, which results in continuing health problems. Diesel particles are very small, he said, and other toxins, such as those

from heavy metals or various industrial pollutants, attach themselves to the small particles, which people then breathe deeply into their lungs. "You can see why this would have a particularly bad effect on older people and children," Monk said. A related hazard common to areas such as Hunter's Point is exposure to volatile organic compounds used at industrial sites.

David Baldrige, who now heads the National Indian Project Center, studied the impact of pollution on elders with colleagues while he served as executive director of the National Indian Council on the Aging, based in Albuquerque, N.M. "In my work, I've seen various environmental health disparities affecting older adults of color. Racial and ethnic groups are exposed to different levels of environmental pollutants. For example, exposure to air pollution with ozone levels, particulate matter smaller than 10 microns (very fine dust) and carbon monoxide is of particular concern for Asian, Asian-Pacific and Hispanic groups. This information is based on regional environmental analyses and relates to where these groups live rather than to exposure due to work-related activities."

REFINERIES

The effects of airborne toxins are also evident across the bay from San Francisco in Richmond, Calif., home to the Chevron Texaco refinery. The plant spews a deadly array of particles, such as dioxins, on the largely African American, Southeast Asian and Latino communities located near it. Since 1999, toxic emissions in Richmond have increased 20%, and most of the increase can be attributed to the Chevron refinery, the largest polluter in the city, according to the Environmental Protection Agency Toxic Release Inventory for 2002. The Chevron facility has registered hundreds of accidents, including major fires, spills, leaks, explosions, toxic gas releases, flaring and air contaminations. These operations have contributed to severe injuries and illnesses, ranging from asthma to cancer, in the adjacent community.

"The only chance I have to breathe clean air is if someone will take me on an outing, away from the pollution that daily requires me to stay indoors," said one participant in the ASA study.

To learn about what elders and professionals had to say at each of the California sites, readers can obtain the 53-page report, "Older Adults of Color and Environmental Health: Listening Sessions and Interviews to Impact Public Policy and Develop a National Agenda on the Environment and Aging," on the ASA website at www.asaging.org/diversity.

The EPA expects to complete a draft of its national agenda later this year and will post it at www.epa.gov/aging, where the public will be invited to make comments before the agency completes the final agenda in the fall. ASA will disseminate the EPA agenda and its own findings nationally to service providers and advocates for older Americans, to strengthen their capacity to be responsive to environmental health issues affecting older people of color. The information will be distributed via the Web and through print publications, as well as in several sessions to be held at the upcoming Joint Conference of the American Society on Aging and the National Council on the Aging in San Francisco, April 14–17, 2004. ❖

Susan Markey, former vice president of communications for the American Society on Aging, directed the study "Older Adults of Color and Environmental Health."